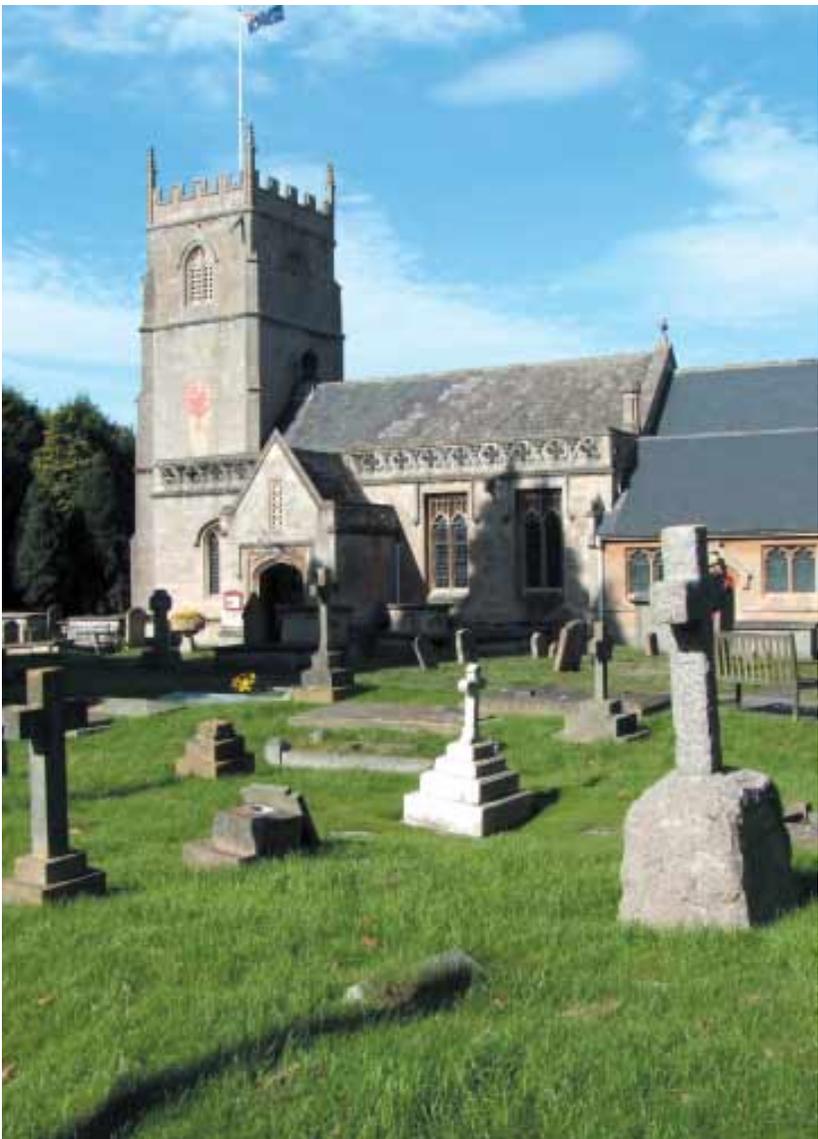


C&Cviaggio





Left "The only parish church in England with kangaroos in the stained glass windows". The mediaeval church of St Nicholas at Bathampton in Somerset where Arthur Phillip and his wife Isabella are buried. Right Arthur Phillip, commander of the First Fleet to Australia. A service in his memory is held at Bathampton each year. Opposite page A grand Georgian house in Bath, typical of the city's stately architecture. Arthur Phillip recovered his health in this city, renowned for its healing waters, and lived in Bath in his later years until his death.

Founding father ... neglected hero

Anyone who knows anything about the early history of Australia will know that Captain Arthur Phillip was commander of the First Fleet and first governor of the colony of New South Wales. What they might not know is that in his native England, in spite of several memorials and annual commemorations, he is not so well known – certainly not as well as his achievements and service to his country should merit. That's why a dedicated group of Australians in Britain have joined forces with organisations here that are determined to honour the name of Phillip and widen the knowledge of this remarkable man without whom there would be no Sydney, no Australia and we wouldn't even have Australia Day.

BY BRIAN STAVELEY



Above Arthur Phillip's grave is marked by this plaque in the floor of the church of St Nicholas at Bathampton. The grave went unnoticed for some 80 years after Phillip's death. Beyond the plaque is a memorial tablet in the balustrade of Australian black bean. The floor is laid with Wombeyan marble from Australia. Right The monument-filled interior of the Australia Chapel in Bathampton church, adjacent to Arthur Phillip's grave. Converted from a private family chapel, the chapel was refurbished and dedicated in 1975.



PRISONS AND CRIMINALITY were to loom large in the career of Arthur Phillip. It was partly an accident of birth, coming into this world as he did in October 1738 in the ward of Bread Street in the City of London where a near neighbour was the rancid and overflowing cells of Newgate Prison crammed with the supposed rogues, reprobates and outlaws of a harsh penal system.

It was this association, amongst others, that much later gave Phillip the command of the First Fleet bound for Australia, a fleet "supplied" partly with convicts from Newgate and destined for transportation to the other side of the world. (Phillip, by the way, is usually known as "Captain" in Australia, though he became an admiral and was also the first Governor of New South Wales.) But why did this exceptional journey and pioneering venture fall to him?

For Sir Roger Carrick, former British high commissioner to Australia and a specialist on Phillip's life, it was a function of

his "already varied and impressive professional naval career". Others tend towards a more conspiratorial explanation. Sir Michael Savory, current chairman of the Arthur Phillip Memorial Trust, stressed to me that command of the First Fleet was given deliberately to Phillip by a hostile and

resentful Admiralty, where some elements were determined to blight his career and condemn him to certain failure. (The Russian equivalent might be "promotion" to run a power station in the vastnesses of Siberia.) As we now know, it was an exercise in which Phillip triumphed, insisting that what could

have been a grim and penitential journey form part of an organised, humane and enlightened attempt to establish an overseas colony.

Australians nowadays enjoy a day off to mark the anniversary of the First Fleet's arrival. But in Captain Phillip's homeland celebrations of the event, in midwinter, are fewer and more muted, characterised by a few sherries at a celebratory lunch rather than several "stubbies" at a festive "barbie".

Phillip's achievement is now recognised annually and appropriately by the City of London and the Admiral Arthur Phillip Memorial Trust in particular. On 22 January a traditional service and memorial address were held at St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside, sometimes known as "the Australian church in London". It was attended by the Australian high commissioner, the agents-general of the states, Australian business leaders, pupils from local schools and other admirers of Arthur Phillip, British and Australian. Sir Michael Savory, who is also a City of London

alderman, likes to refer to Phillip as "London's most famous admiral", adding, provocatively, that "Nelson is no match".

Another admirer of Phillip's achievement is an Australian scholar now living in London, Kevin Fewster, who until recently was director of Sydney's Powerhouse Museum and is now at the helm of the National Maritime Museum, Britain's foremost museum of seafaring and naval history. He delivered this year's commemorative talk on Phillip, which dealt with the governor's relationship with the indigenous people, the original inhabitants of Sydney Cove where the First Fleet landed. As the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* puts it: "One of the offences Phillip refused to tolerate was ill treatment of the Aborigines. In his Instructions he had been ordered to establish contact and maintain friendly relations with them and he took these humanitarian injunctions seriously."

London has two memorials to Arthur Phillip. One is a bust in St Mary-le-Bow that



BRITISH NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

Below The lofty interior of Bath Abbey. Right The Australian flag hangs over the monument to Captain Phillip in Bath Abbey. The monument was erected by the Federal government in 1937. Phillip lived in Bath for many years and died there in 1814. Top right Kevin Fewster, the Australian-born director of Britain's National Maritime Museum. At this year's Arthur Phillip Memorial Trust service in London he spoke on Governor Phillip's relationship with the indigenous inhabitants of Sydney Cove.



gazes down on the “Australian corner” of the church, where members of the RAAF killed during the Second World War are also commemorated. That the bust is there at all is thanks to the Britain–Australia Bicentennial Trust, which restored and re-erected the memorial after the original was damaged during German bombing in 1941. The ecclesiastical bust comes in tandem, as it were, with another restored Phillip memorial, in nearby Watling Street. Here, in the shadow of St Paul’s Cathedral, a bust of Arthur Phillip looks out on passing pedestrians from a monument on which scenes from the arrival of the First Fleet are depicted.

Plenty of recognition then, at least within the City of London, of Phillip’s seamanship, courage and enlightened policies as governor. But a hundred miles west of London in the rural tranquillity of Somerset they also remember him. On the Friday closest to

Phillip’s birthday on 11 October, in the mediaeval church of St Nicholas, Bathampton, they honour the famous sailor who stayed in and knew this picturesque village well.

“We have the only parish church in England with kangaroos in the stained glass windows,” says the rector, the Reverend Paul Burden, as he shows me around the church where Arthur Phillip and his wife Isabella are buried. The windows show the coats of arms of Australia and its six states and form one of many adornments in the church’s Australian chapel. Dedicated in 1975 and paid for by donations from the federal and state governments and Australian companies and individuals, the chapel has a floor of Wombeyan marble and all the woodwork (including pulpit and choir stalls) is Australian black bean. Chairs were given by many Australian cities and organisations and the

kneelers by Tasmania.

All this, together with the Phillip memorial in the south aisle, which bears the words “Founder of Australia” and faces you immediately you enter the church, forms an impressive and highly appropriate backdrop for the annual commemorative service which in 2008 filled the church to the brim on a weekday morning. Children from the village primary school were there in force, along with diplomatic officials, members of the Britain–Australia Society and Australians living in this part of England. The reflections of a modern sailor, the naval attaché at the Australian High Commission, on the achievement and the privations endured by the First Fleet were very sobering. How many people are aware that this perilous eight-month journey by eleven ships carrying 1373 people across 15,000 nautical miles was one of the greatest voyages ever made? The fact that those on board arrived safely, apart from 23 who died at sea – a remarkably low figure for the era and the length of the journey – is largely owing to Phillip’s leadership, seamanship and humanity.

After the service, Paul Burden pointed me in the direction of nearby Bath, a city familiar to many people from the novels of Jane Austen. Arthur Phillip knew it well and it was the place he chose to rest and recuperate in when he returned to England from Australia in 1793, emaciated, exhausted and in poor health after his exacting but visionary work as governor of the fledgling colony of New South Wales. He was also in constant pain from arthritis and the effects of a serious shoulder injury inflicted by an Aboriginal spear. The graceful beauty of Bath and its therapeutic waters beckoned and, much like the fashionable characters in Jane Austen’s novels, he decided to “take the cure”. He settled at 3 South Parade.

The cure must eventually have worked because in 1796 Phillip resumed his naval service, commanding several ships before finally leaving the service in 1805 with the rank of rear admiral. The following year he and Isabella were back in Bath living at 19 Bennett Street, a handsome house typical of the city’s splendid Georgian buildings and sweeping crescents. It’s recorded that he paid £2200 for it, a vast sum in those days.

This house still holds a secret. Why, in 1814 at the age of 76, did this remarkable man, only three months earlier promoted in his retirement to the high rank of Admiral of the Blue, plunge to his death from its first-floor window?

Some have suggested that this was suicide, even murder. Others (the Britain–Australia



The soaring central tower of Bath Abbey.



Left The monument with bust of Captain Phillip in Watling Street, central London, near where the future commander of the First Fleet was born in 1738.
Right Bronze panels with scenes from the arrival of the fleet and inscriptions are set into the monument.

Society among them) are utterly convinced that Arthur Phillip died naturally, perhaps of a stroke, after enduring years of ill health, or even that he fell asleep and toppled into the street. The speculation over the manner of his death opens up another question for students of his career. Why was such a successful and distinguished man, resident in Bath, buried in rural simplicity and obscurity in a village outside the city rather than with full grandeur in the city's most historic and imposing place of worship, Bath Abbey? Was it, as some who subscribe to the suicide theory speculate, because of the shame that attached to suicide in those days?

Richard Pavitt, chairman of the West Country branch of the Britain-Australia Society gives an entirely different explanation. He and his organisation hold strongly to the view that Arthur Phillip actually chose to be buried in the peaceful surroundings of Bathampton rather than be interred in a Bath Abbey already overcrowded with tombs and memorials. After all, many distinguished people are buried in relative obscurity in the county's rural churches and churchyards.

That's not to say that at Bath Abbey Arthur Phillip is ignored or forgotten. The Australian government erected a monument in his honour there in 1937. An Australian flag hangs above it, drawing your eye down towards some of the words used to summarise Phillip's achievement in laying the foundations of a nation out of what was intended as a kind of overseas branch of Newgate prison. On the monument is inscribed: "To his Indomitable Courage, Prophetic Vision, Forbearance, Faith, Inspiration and Wisdom was due the Success

of the First Settlement in Australia at Sydney 26th January 1788."

So, for any Australian visiting Britain and wanting to honour Arthur Phillip, modern eulogies and tributes can be found if you know where to look. It remains a fact though, his naval promotion notwithstanding, that Phillip was not recognised as a hero by his countrymen after his death, and is hardly well-known in Britain even today, except to a small and devout circle of historians and admirers who have helped resurrect his name and who now keep his reputation alive. It's worth remembering that Arthur Phillip's grave in the church went pretty well unnoticed for more than 80 years after his death. It was only in 1897 that the vicar of St Nicholas started an embryonic campaign to establish a more fitting memorial than just the grave, culminating in 1974 in the Australian chapel visitors to the church see today.

Even this seems insufficient to some. The prominent Australian lawyer now resident in London, Geoffrey Robertson QC, describes himself as "appalled" by the apparent British neglect of a national hero. Robertson thinks that Phillip's remains, which he once said he believed had been lost, should be recovered and then reburied in Australia. He detects a contempt by "the Poms" for Phillip, further evidence, he says, that "the British have not cared about Australian history".

But Sir Roger Carrick, who works tirelessly through the Britain-Australia Society to preserve Phillip's memory and enhance his reputation, takes the polar opposite view. For him there's no doubt that St Nicholas church is Arthur Phillip's rightful resting place. He maintains that Arthur Phillip

never encouraged the celebrity or attention that might have made him extravagantly famous. Sir Roger's view is that Phillip had no capacity or appetite for self-promotion, and was thus overlooked in "a late eighteenth century where England had a lust for heroes... for men of action and success in battle... like Nelson."

This makes you wonder whether, if he could be consulted, Arthur Phillip would appreciate a high-publicity international attempt to honour his name and send his body to Australia. Of course the journey – with Qantas presumably – would be immeasurably faster than in 1788. But perhaps relative obscurity in rural England, with his epic achievements acknowledged by an admiring few, is what he would really have wanted. ■

Brian Staveley is British and European correspondent for *Coast & Country*. All photographs in this story were taken by him unless otherwise credited.

Governor Arthur Phillip's tomb is in the churchyard of St Nicholas' church, Bathampton, Bath BA2 6TU. There are further details on the website www.stnicholasandstmarys.org.uk.

St Mary-le-Bow Church, where an annual Arthur Phillip memorial service is held and there is a Phillip memorial, is in Cheapside, London EC2 5AV. Website: www.stmarylebow.co.uk.

The Britain-Australia Society in London is at Swire House, 59 Buckingham Gate, London SW1 6AJ. Website: www.britain-australia.org.uk. The society has information about Arthur Phillip memorials and commemorative events.

There is further information about Bath Abbey and the city's other landmarks on the website: www.visitbath.co.uk.